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ABSTRACT

In order to restore public confidence in intercollegiate athletics (following well-publicized problems) it is necessary to address a set of serious systematic problems, suggests the president of the American Council on Education. Diagnosis and treatment of the underlying pathology is important to avoid dealing with the symptoms alone. The Presidents' Commission has applied tougher sanctions, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has added additional enforcement resources, but they are not long-term solutions. Efforts to keep college sports programs free of scandal are being overpowered by economic and social forces. Problems include an overemphasis on winning, over concern with spectators, a tolerance for academic compromises, and a tendency to link athletic accomplishments with institutional quality and prestige. The media feeds this sports craze, as do economic realities which often tempt people to cut the rule-book corners. Succeeding on the field and balancing the budget results in serious academic compromises. There is a growing relationship between professional sports and intercollegiate sports. Possible alternatives are doing nothing, making an effort to return to amateur student athletics, or acknowledging professionalism in college athletics. It is important to break the tie between money and winning. Possible solutions include cutting the length of the season, providing institutional subsidy for athletics, eliminating athletic scholarships, and providing long-term coaching contracts. (SM)

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Putting College Sports in Perspective

Solutions for the Long Term

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by Robert H. Atwell

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Robert H. Atwell, president of the American Council on Education, presented the following speech at the National Collegiate Athletic Association's National Forum on January 11, 1988 in Nashville.

Are the well-publicized problems that plague big-time intercollegiate athletics simply isolated cases in an otherwise healthy enterprise, or is the system basically unhealthy, a condition that goes far beyond the need for tighter enforcement and some modification of the present rules? I will argue that we have a major set of systemic problems that must be addressed if we are serious about restoring public confidence in intercollegiate athletics. If my view is correct, then we must take care to diagnose and treat the underlying pathology, lest we deal only with the symptoms. Thus, while I applaud the tougher sanctions initiated by the Presidents' Commission and welcome the additional enforcement resources the NCAA is applying to the problem, these first steps should not be confused with long-term solutions.

Robert H. Atwell

So let me first assert that the efforts to keep the football programs of about 100 institutions and the basketball programs of perhaps 200 or more institutions free of scandal are being overpowered not by the forces of evil but by economic and social forces more potent than many of us realize. The problems that have afflicted substantial numbers of programs in this relatively small number of institutions have brought discredit by association to all of American higher education, not just in athletics and not simply to the institutions directly affected. Thus we all, irrespective of division or place within our institutions, have a stake in the reform of the big-time programs. Parenthetically, I am aware that there are serious problems in baseball, hockey, and track—just to name three other sports—but those problems pale when contrasted with the problems associated with football and basketball.

The underlying causes or elements of "the problem" include an overemphasis on winning at the expense of other values; an over concern with spectator sports and spectator facilities as opposed to better facilities for, and more emphasis on, participation in life-long fitness activities; a tolerance for the academic compromises that stem from the economic and social pressures; and on a thoroughly perverse tendency, when comparing institutions, to suggest a link between athletic accomplishments and institutional quality or prestige.

Having at least partially described one person's view of the problem, let us look at the underlying causes. First, we live in a sports-crazed society in which collegiate and spectator sports generate billions of dollars at the gate and in television advertising, not to mention gifts from the more affluent among the college faithful.

The spectator-sports craze is fed and accentuated by the media. The press dwells almost exclusively on big-time college and professional football and basketball to the exclusion of the less well-known institutions and the

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less spectator-oriented sports. In thinking about the role of the press in collegiate athletics, I am indebted to a very cogent op-ed piece by Southern Methodist University President Kenneth Pye (New York *Times*, December 13, 1987).

Anyone who deals with the sports press as well as with regular news correspondents knows how overstaffed are the sports departments of so many of our newspapers. Only a few of the major newspapers in this country have even one education writer, but the lowliest local paper has a sports staff that has to keep busy by over-reporting the big-time programs while giving short shrift to virtually everything else.

The media may not have created the sports-crazy society, but it has often spoken with forked tongue about the problem and certainly has not been part of the solution. There is a hypocritical tendency on the part of some sports editorial writers to decry the scandals in big-time athletics while ignoring the plain fact that their own reporting and editorial policies have been major contributors to the problem.

But the media only aid and abet the less wholesome dimensions of the sports craze. As parents who would rather watch sports than introduce our kids to lifelong fitness activities, as school board members and school district taxpayers who permit ex-coaches to teach social studies or to divert excessive resources to athletics, as newspaper readers who first open the sports page, as fans who demand the heads of losing coaches, as booster club members who would rather contribute to athletics than to academics, and as faculty representatives who become seduced by the "perks," we are all in varying degrees guilty as charged.

When it comes to sports, we need to examine our own basic values and ask: do we still believe it is not whether we win or lose but how we play the game that counts; do we really believe that fair play and sportsmanship are as important as winning? And is the real lesson of sports that at its best it will teach us as much about losing as about winning? The "losing is dying," "winning is everything," "you have to do whatever you have to do to win" mentality functioning in our society is so deeply rooted that it will take a reordering of our basic values to bring about serious change.

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A second cause of our problem in collegiate athletics lies in the economic realities of the big-time programs. As so many of you know much better than I, it is very expensive to run a program of 12 to 15 sports each for men and women at the highest level of competition. One of the supreme ironies in college athletics is that the institutions that emphasize athletics the most are the ones that subsidize it the least. Division II and III institutions and some of the I AA institutions treat athletics as another college or university activity worthy of at least some institutional resources. But most of the institutions with big-time programs insist that intercollegiate athletics pay for themselves. What that really means is that football and/or basketball must make enough to carry those sports and everything else.

For most institutions, this is asking a lot. The only way to accomplish this economic objective is to sell tickets, attract television, make the basketball playoffs or football bowl games, and attract financial support from the booster clubs. All too often, the budget is balanced by booster club gifts; it is axiomatic that the more important booster support is to the finances of the program, the more influence the boosters will wield.

While bowl games and television revenue sharing eases the pressures to win somewhat, particularly in football, the fact remains that the only sure way to generate the income is to win. And the only way to win is to have the best (read highest-priced) coaches and the best athletes. Thus we have all the temptations to cut the rule-book corners. As California State University, Long Beach President Steve Horn has said, it is a vicious cycle in which we have to make more money to spend on more things and on and on and on. If one had to point to a single factor among the many that have corrupted college sports, it would be money.

The growing relationship between professional sports and intercollegiate football and basketball programs is a prominent and very troubling aspect of the role that money now plays at the college level. The perception that college sports have been professionalized has contributed to the growing public cynicism. The lack of clarity in the role of agents and the perception that colleges have become, in effect, the minor leagues for professional football and basketball are very troubling for anyone who believes in the amateur student-athlete model.

The need to succeed on the field and balance the budget has caused some severe academic compromises. Some of the worst excesses pertaining to initial eligibility and satisfactory progress (including the phenomenon known as "majoring in eligibility") have been addressed in recent years through Rule 48 and Rule 56 and other salutary legislation. Coach Thompson and Coach Paterno certainly exemplify the kind of athletic leadership we need to stress academic performance and graduation, but the fact remains that there are still too many programs and too many coaches who care more about eligibility than education.

The problem really extends into the public schools and into the family structure of the nation. The dream in the heads of so many youngsters that they will achieve fame and riches in professional sports in touching, but it is also overwhelmingly unrealistic. Parents and teachers should be telling kids that they ought to get an education because the chance of becoming a professional athlete is somewhere between slim and none.

That mind-set is developed long before college, but colleges have an obligation to make it clearer than they have to the students, parents, and the schools that very few people make a living in professional sports. Unfortunately, I could argue that college coaches may have a vested interest in perpetuating the myth rather than pointing out its inherent fallacy. In the future the academic responsibility of colleges increasingly will extend to the public schools because education is really all one system, a seamless web.

One of the academic compromises necessitated by the present structure of big-time college athletics is the diversion of governing board and CEO attention. I know many college presidents who resent the time and vigilance they must give to athletics, which is by no means at the academic center of the institution.

Presidential attention to the academic enterprise suffers considerably from the pressures of athletics and presidents have often been guilty of giving mixed messages to coaches and athletic directors: play within the rules but be sure to win. And governing boards, more often than not, are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It is ironic how much attention governing boards can give to hiring or firing a football or basketball coach and how little attention they give to building the physics department. Faculty oversight has long since ceased to be effective in most institutions.

There is a working assumption out there that winning athletic programs equal winning seasons with legislatures and donors. I have heard that argued both ways, but it is a little like the predicament of the rather unselective private college facing the question of investing in the admissions program. There may be no relationship between the size of the admissions budget and the success of the admissions program, but one dare not run an experiment designed to show that there is no relationship. So some presidents look the other way when the booster clubs generate millions for athletics while the academic programs are starved for gift support. My own untested hypothesis is that athletic success breeds gifts for athletics but not for much else and that legislative support is largely a function of other factors, most notably the fiscal condition of the state.

If one had to point to a single factor among the many that have corrupted college sports, it would be money.

Faced with the problem as I have tried to define it, and some propositions about its causes, what are the alternatives? Several years ago I wrote that there were really three possibilities: move to acknowledged professionalism in college football and basketball, pay the athletes a market wage, and remove the requirement that they be students; make an earnest effort to return to the amateur student-athlete model; or do nothing.

If doing nothing is the choice, I argued we would surely arrive at the first alternative. I learned that most presidents earnestly desire the second alternative and some are even willing to pay the price in terms of the risks to their own careers, the jeopardy to their budgets, and the wrath of important constituents. While courage is an essential part of effectuating the second alternative and while I could cite numerous examples of such presidential courage, it also requires a major investment of presidential time and old-fashioned political strategy to pull it off. When it comes to athletics, I have seen more presidential courage than presidential political sagacity.

If you as athletic directors, coaches, faculty representatives, and CEOs believe that we have the kind of systemic problem I have described—and I am not so presumptuous nor naive to believe that you share that view—how would we go about addressing the problems?

First and foremost, we must try to break the insidious connection between money and winning. As you know, the National Football League distributes its television money equally among the 28 franchises. At the college level we approach that within conferences but certainly not within Division IA as a whole. Indeed, I would think that the effect of the free market for football television since the Georgia and Oklahoma lawsuit brought the NCAA "monopoly" to a close is to concentrate the television income on even fewer institutions than may have been the case before. I can only wonder if we are all happy with the results of that litigation. In basketball there seems to be less sharing than in football, particularly when it comes to the NCAA Division One men's tournament. I have always been intrigued by Al McGuire's idea of dividing the NCAA postseason basketball pot of gold by the 275 or so institutions that play Division I men's basketball.

Secondly, to recognize the saliency of academic values, I would cut the length of season, particularly in baseball and basketball. More than 85 baseball games is simply incompatible with the student-athlete ideal, and a basketball season that begins with practice on October 15 and ends

after the first of April is an academic travesty. Postseason conference basketball tournaments are a redundancy justified and motivated only by the money they generate. I commend the leadership of the NCAA Council in resisting the pressures for a Division IA football playoff, and I subscribe to Georgetown University President Healy's idea of having no basketball games before Christmas or after March 15.

Third, because the first two ideas would cause financial hardships for many programs, I would argue for an institutional subsidy of athletics. If athletics is so important to the institutions with big-time programs, then the programs deserve better than being regarded as self-supporting "auxiliary enterprises." Indeed, the very term is completely at variance with reality. If athletics had to compete with chemistry and economics and the admissions office for budgetary resources, one would see some spirited controversy on the proper role of athletics on a college campus. But we should not expect athletic directors to perform miracles such as balancing the budget with less revenue and the same number of sports at the same level of competition.

Fourth, I would move to eliminate athletic scholarships, relying entirely on need-based aid with athletes treated the same as other students. I am aware of the argument that athletes generate so much income and spend so many hours in practice and competition that they should be rewarded for their efforts. But if we are serious about the amateur model, the commercial argument holds no water; and if we are not serious about the amateur model, then "wages" should be considerably higher in many cases. If we insist on continuing athletic aid, I think we should provide a full fifth year of support in recognition of the fact that student athletes have such demands put upon them that it is unusual for them to graduate in four years.

Fifth, I would move to eliminate freshman eligibility in football and basketball, would severely limit, if not eliminate, organized practice in that year, and would not have junior varsity or freshman teams. Rule 48 was a step in the right direction, but we could send an even more powerful message in saying that because of the unique pressures of football and basketball, students should become academically established before participating.

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Sixth, coaches should routinely be given long-term (say five-year) contracts, and those contracts should be subject not only to the NCAA and conference rules but also to appropriate conduct on the court or on the field. Coaches ought to be given a measure of job security in recognition of the pressures and, in return, they should be held to a code of conduct that befits a representative of an institution of higher learning: no baiting of officials, no tantrums, no abuse of athletes, and a concern for fair play and sportsmanship. Finally, coaches should be expected to stress the supremacy of education over athletic participation.

To bring about any or all of these and other desirable reforms calls for both courage and political organization at all three levels: the institution, the conference, and the NCAA. Everything starts at the institutional level and it starts with the committed leadership of the CEO, supported by the governing board. Because athletic disarmament, as a practical matter, can never be unilateral, there must be agreement at least within conferences. Today, I see presidential leadership being played out most effectively at the conference level, most notably in the Big 10, PAC 10, and ACC Conferences. In these conferences, the presidents increasingly call the important shots and their leadership on that level will inevitably spill over into the NCAA.

Since I am speaking at an NCAA conference, it is perhaps both presumptuous and foolish of me to comment on the role of this organization. But since the American Council on Education and I, personally, have often in times past been painted by the media as pitted against the NCAA, I want to use the occasion to say again that the problems within collegiate athletics have not been caused by the NCAA. Indeed, the NCAA has tried and is still trying to exert leadership to reform the system.

The Presidents' Commission is a noble experiment, which has thus far produced mixed results—successes on the enforcement front in the New Orleans special convention several years ago, and a marked loss of momentum in last year's special convention. But the structure is there, albeit not as potent a structure as some of us wanted, and the presidents who serve on the Presidents' Commission are eager for reform.

The NCAA is fortunate, in my judgment, to have as its CEO Dick Schultz, whose vast experience and personal commitment stand him in good stead in moving this organization to strengthen the amateur student-athlete model. I have to pay tribute also to Dick's predecessor Walter Byers who really built this association. In his last years in office, Walter was at times a voice in the wilderness, pointing to the problems that needed to be addressed.

The NCAA remains a very promising vehicle for reform. We do not need Federal legislation, but we do need to show that we are capable of dealing with our own problems. I remain cautiously optimistic that the conferences, the institutions, and the NCAA can show the way. ■